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City of Houston Targets Males with New Public Health Initiative

By: Greg Barnes

The Houston Department of Health and Human Services (HDHHS) is rolling out a large-scale male health initiative in the fall of 2009, responding to calls by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). This new initiative focuses on increasing male involvement in the family planning process; males will be educated about the importance and benefits of sharing responsibility for pregnancy, parenthood, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Research findings from a pilot project funded by DSHS and Planned Parenthood of South Texas, the Male Central Clinic, indicate that increased involvement leads to positive changes in men's attitudes and behaviors about overall health. Major components of the HDHHS initiative are:

(1) results-based programming that encourages prevention, early diagnosis and treatment of male-specific diseases; and

(2) integration of male-focused family planning services into existing clinic services. The hallmark of the initiative is the creation of identifiable male-only family planning clinics throughout our local public health system.

The Male Central Clinic (MCC), now a national model project, began as a 5-year, pilot project study to increase the number of males served in a Title X family planning clinic. According to the US DHHS Office of Population Affairs, public policies in family planning and reproductive health have focused almost exclusively on females and, prior to 1995, few if any resources targeted males. The MCC project found that males did want to be included in family planning and were willing to access traditional Title X clinics that made changes to meet their needs. The results were positive changes in health behaviors that benefitted everyone involved.

According to DSHS, Title X family planning male involvement projects – education, counseling, and medical services – should focus on preventing and controlling pregnancy, STDs and HIV; healthy intimate relationships; responsible fatherhood; and sexual health. DSHS believes that healthier and happier families are created when both the mother and father are prepared for and committed to parenthood, and are educated about maintaining their own sexual and reproductive health.

HDHHS took early steps to gain insight on implementing male involvement programs by attending the 2007 and 2008 Title X Family Planning Project Director's Conferences and, most recently, making a site visit to the Male Central Clinic. HDHHS will continue to network with MCC and other providers with similar male-focused programs to exchange ideas and learn best practices.

The inaugural event for the initiative is the **2nd Annual MAN UP - Male Health & Wellness Expo** on June 13, 2009, at the George R. Brown Convention Center. It is one of many national health promotion and screening events targeting men during June, Men's Health Month, and specifically, during National Men's Health Week, June 15 – 21, 2009. Goals for the event are to empower men to take responsibility for their health and to heighten awareness of preventable health problems. For more information on the male health initiative and the MAN UP Expo, please contact Greg Barnes at greg.barnes@cityofhouston.net or 713.859.4964.